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The crisis represented by the turmoil in Iran might well mark the end of an era for American foreign policy. It seems highly improbable, as of this writing, that out of this turmoil there could emerge a stable government friendly to American interests. More likely is a Communist regime in the not too distant future, or a national-socialist-Islamic regime (on the Libyan model), or some peculiar amalgam of the two — from the American point of view it hardly matters. What is decisive is the fact that the existence of any such regime, taken together with a Communist Ethiopia, a Communist Afghanistan, and a disintegrating Turkey, means the effective expulsion of American power from the entire Middle East.

The economic, political and military consequences of such an event are almost impossible to exaggerate. We can manage, if uncomfortably, without Iranian oil, but we — and Europe and Japan — cannot manage without Saudi Arabian oil. Yet it is fairly certain that a friendly (or at least not hostile) Saudi regime cannot survive in the kind of isolation that now looms ahead for it. A new Saudi regime — or an old regime with new policies — will doubtless continue to sell its oil abroad, but it surely will also attach all sorts of political-diplomatic strings to such sales. Our NATO partners, if their behavior during the 1973 embargo is any precedent, will obligingly repackage their own foreign policies with those strings.

The Camp David agreement inevitably will become a dead letter, as Egypt falls into line with the new Middle East realities. Jordan, Iraq and Syria, too, will forsake whatever "moderation" they have, in recent years, acquired. Under those circumstances, a new Arab war against Israel — the one nation in that part of the world that is still a friend to us — would seem certain. The United States would deplore such a war, of course — but what would it do? What could it do?

Our reaction to this crisis has been revealing. The White House, we are informed, has solemnly told the Russians not to "intervene" in Iran. In return, the Russians have given us an exact duplicate of this warning. One hardly knows whether to laugh or cry at these demarches. The Russians have neither the need nor the intention of actually sending troops across the border. They may not even desire a Communist Iran; any species of anti-American Iran should suffice for their purposes. As a result of spending tens of millions of dollars, over many years, to build up clandestine organizations and operations in Iran, they are well situated to emerge with satisfactory results from the current chaos. Our own CIA, of course, has been rendered impotent for any countervailing action. Nor does our government have the means or the will to engage in direct military intervention. Instead, it seems to be fully preoccupied with intense self-analysis.

Should we have supported the shah? The consensus in Washington at the moment seems to be that, in retrospect, this was unwise and probably immoral, since it turns out that he was never really all that popular. Should we have intervened in a clandestine way to overthrow the shah? That same consensus regards any such action, anywhere, as unwise and definitely immoral. Should we actually and openly intervene with military force to establish a new and more stable government? The consensus regards such an action as unwise and immoral in the extreme. Should we support a military coup that would inaugurate a friendly military dictatorship? That is clearly so unwise and immoral as to be unthinkable. After all, we are now busy disentangling ourselves from "embarrassing" alliances with other friendly military dictatorships, and are not about to create a brand new one.

So where does that leave us? It leaves us with nothing — with a patently bankrupt foreign policy. Oh, yes, we'd like very much to see a liberal-constitutional regime emerge in Iran. But the chances of that happening are practically nil. The kinds of political traditions and ideological passions that prevail today throughout most of the so-called Third World are incompatible with any such outcome. The world is just not now of a mind to give birth to new liberal-constitutional regimes.

Moreover, our policy is not only bankrupt in the sense of our being unable to act, but bankrupt in the sense that we have obviously lost the ability even to think coherently about foreign policy. Every thought gives rise merely to a new paradox, a new dilemma. It is the end of the road — a road down which we began to travel some 60 years ago, when Woodrow Wilson first devised the intellectual framework within which American foreign policy has since been trapped.

Wilsonian liberalism marked a radical departure from the previous styles of American foreign policy, which had centered quite specifically on the idea of "national interest." Our isolation from European affairs prior to 1912 was defended in those terms, so were our nationalist-expansionist policies in the Western hemisphere. True, we preached to the world the blessings of self-government, and held ourselves up as a shining example — but we did little else to the world, as the world did little else to us.

It was Woodrow Wilson who first gave American foreign policy its distinctive character — a compound of evangelical idealism and strict legalism. The notion that, since we were now a world power, it was our destiny to convert the world to instant democracy was born then, as was the idea that the sovereignty of international law, under the aegis of a League of Nations, would establish a benign and enduring world order.

Traces of this Wilsonianism are still much in evidence in the way we conduct our foreign affairs. What else explains our stubborn attachment to the United Nations despite the indignities and humiliations it incessantly exposes us to? And what else can explain the automatic passion with which our State Department reacts to any transgression of existing boundaries, regardless of provocation or circumstance, regardless of whether it is committed by friend against foe (Suez in 1956), foe against friend, or foe against foe (Vietnam and Cambodia)? The man in the street certainly sees a difference; the State Department cannot.

The utopianism of Wilsonian liberalism is now generally recognized and discounted. Still, in all fairness to it one must say that it had a vitality and self-confidence that our later foreign policies lacked. It tended to make us overly arrogant and self-righteous, but not incredibly feeble and self-deprecating. In our own day, Senator Moynihan has tried to revive a kind of Wilsonian vigor and self-confidence, but with only minimal success. The world is simply no longer a place where the Wilsonian vision of liberal democracy universally triumphant can be taken seriously. In truth, it never really was such a place.

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